

The Auto and the Environment: Approaching a Turning Point

Norman Robbins

The connection in this symposium between the history of transportation and the current debate on urban sprawl is very appropriate because the problems and benefits of today's automobile usage continue transportation trends begun more than a century ago. These trends are rapidly approaching inevitable limits which are social, economic, and environmental. America led the development of the auto and its infrastructure because it perfectly suited many of our circumstances and values and because few foresaw any negative long-term consequences. Once embedded in our hearts, minds, and economy, auto-dependent public expenditures and land use planning became progressively more captive to lobbyists and the public's own desire for speed, convenience, usage, and (for some) social compartmentalization. Countervailing forces are now building which eventually will compel us to restructure our modes of transportation and even life-styles. These include: re-emergence of other threatened American values—e.g. love of neighborhood, sense of fairness; costs of maintaining bloated infrastructure and environmentally destructive land use; irritation with increasing congestion; telecommunications; and national and eventually international air quality regulations restricting emissions of pollutants and greenhouse gases. Technologic fixes such as electric vehicles or automated highways are worthwhile but only buy time. Cassandras, prophets, and isolated "alternative success stories" are slowly raising public awareness, creating a demand for new and better options. We are reluctantly approaching a turning point: we need creative options and public debate. This symposium is a step in the right direction.